

# TEACHER-LED INITIATIVES IN SUPPORTING LEARNER EMPOWERMENT AMONG MALAY TERTIARY LEARNERS

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – Learner empowerment or learner autonomy is regarded by some theorists as the self-propelled, sole effort of the learner. However, in creating self-directed learners who are empowered to learn, the role of significant others such as the instructor is imperative. This study shows how a committed lecturer can play an instrumental role in facilitating self-directed learning among learners.

**Methodology** – Learner autonomy in vocabulary learning was successfully facilitated among a group of Malay tertiary learners pursuing a Business Studies course in Malaysia. This qualitative study explored the lecturer's proactive efforts and initiatives in raising learners' confidence in learning vocabulary. Data were collected through reflective in-depth interviews with the lecturer and learners at the end of every week for one month to obtain insights into their learning experiences.

**Findings** – The lecturer's pedagogical approaches of providing sufficient learning opportunities in class, teaching vocabulary in context, using vocabulary lists and direct methods, and building lessons spirally to reinforce learning made complex tasks become manageable and achievable. These efforts were well-commended by the learners in this study. The lecturer's conscious decisions, namely, encouraging collaborative learning tasks and not forcing reluctant speakers were guided by her awareness of the learners' cultural background which impinged on their learning preferences, thus, creating a non-threatening learning environment.

**Significance** – This study establishes the case that learner empowerment is not teacherless learning but is fostered when the instructor is able to pitch the lesson at an appropriate level and create a conducive and positive learning environment to synchronise with the learners' cultural traits.

**Keywords:** Learner empowerment, autonomy, vocabulary, teacher, Malay tertiary learners.

## INTRODUCTION

Learner empowerment and autonomous learning are interchangeable terms related to self-directed study. It is a learning process in which learners take control and responsibility for their own learning. The notion of learning independently as a process, instead of a product has been of interest since ancient times (Giang, 2010). The perspective of empowerment as a process (Barillaro, 2011; Reinders, 2010; Giang, 2010; Thanasoulas, 2000) is still prevalent in current literature on education and learning.

The term learner autonomy has been of use in at least five ways (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 2):

- for situations in which learners study entirely on their own
- for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning
- for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education
- for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning
- for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

In exploring the characteristics of empowered learners, Cohen (1998) states that extensive empirical work supports the finding that good learners know where their strengths are, know when to use certain strategies to tackle certain learning problems with flexibility and have learned to possess the key responsibilities for self-directed learning. The literature concurs that self-directed learners demonstrate a high degree of awareness regarding their responsibility for meaningful

learning and are able to monitor themselves. Empowered learning is also “able to arouse students’ interest and learning initiative, improve students’ learning effectiveness and develop students’ autonomous learning capacity, compared with the traditional teaching model” (Guo & Zhang, 2004, p. 6). Empowered learners are noted to demonstrate curiosity, readily try new things, perceive problems as challenges to overcome, desire change, enjoy learning, are motivated and persistent, independent, self-disciplined, self-confident and goal-oriented.

In a nutshell, Macaro’s (2001) conclusion on empowered learners points to the consensus view that “one thing seems to be increasingly clear which is, across learning contexts, those learners who are proactive in their pursuit of language learning appear to learn best” (p. 264). Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore how proactive Malaysian learners were, with the teacher as a guide and leading them in their pursuit to autonomy in the learning of vocabulary items.

In the process of learning vocabulary in a meaningful way, there is a need to draw a line between “learning the meanings of specific words” and “learning strategies to become independent word learners” (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000, p. 505). Learners should not only learn how to acquire new words, but also learn to be responsible for their own vocabulary development.

Blachowicz and Fisher (2000) suggest four activities to promote autonomy and become active vocabulary learners. Firstly, learners ought to develop and use various strategies in selecting words deemed important for their learning. The two main strategies are to experiment with contextual guessing, and to examine different types of dictionaries and know how to use them (Hunt & Beglar, 1998, cited in Torres & Ramos, 2003). Secondly, learners must receptively and expressively (productively) learn words in their own field of study. Next, it is necessary to retain and use vocabulary to facilitate and enhance subsequent learning. Finally, learners must evaluate their own vocabulary development and reflect upon it.

Thus, learners need to learn independently and make choices relating to word meanings that they need to know, subject to their own purposes and idiosyncratic environments. What every learner

must do is to learn words so that he/she can behave appropriately in a given context and contribute to the language community, which inevitably hinges on each learner's autonomous learning of vocabulary (Baba, 2004).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

What is the situation in Malaysia? What is the learning “climate” in Malaysian classrooms? and what is the Malay learners’ predisposition to empowerment? Although most teachers would readily agree that independent learning should be encouraged, are the teachers being truly honest? The Malaysian education system is one where the role of the teacher and learner is clearly delineated (Saleh & Aziz, 2012; Thang, 2009; Thang & Alias, 2007). The learner is there to learn and the teacher to teach. The teacher may be worried about losing his or her control over the learners. The learners on the other hand, expect the teacher to teach; hence all knowledge and information must come from the teacher (Saleh & Aziz, 2012; Thang, 2009; Thang & Alias, 2007) “whereby learners assume the part of ‘empty vessels’ to be filled up by the teachers alone” (Naginder, 2006, p. 22). Therefore, the notion of spoon feeding, with teacher-centred approaches, drills and chalk-and-talk methods continue to take place in the classroom.

The question we confront is: why are teachers afraid of losing control? Why are learners not willing to learn independently? Many learners have a pre-conceived perception about their lack of skills and self-confidence in assuming responsibility for empowered learning. As a result, negative attitudes towards self-directed learning are displayed. Many studies in Malaysia have confirmed learners’ lack of initiatives and readiness for empowerment, as well as their preference for the teacher to make major decisions pertaining to the teaching and learning process (Thang, 2009; Thang & Alias, 2007; Choy & Troudi, 2006; Nordin & Naginder, 2004; Nair & Ratnam, 2003).

Another perspective to explain Malaysian learners’ reluctance to play an active role in the classroom is by looking at their cultural beliefs and practices. Malaysian learners, being Asians are typically bound by the strong adherence to Eastern values, which emphasise

dignity and honour for older members of the community and restraint of self, hence, the laidback attitude (Thang & Alias, 2007). In consequence, their academic behavior is very much rooted in their values of adherence and respect for the teacher, as shown below.

Table 1

*Asian and Western Values of Academic Behaviour (Adapted from Flowerdew and Miller, 1995)*

Asian	Western
• Respect for authority of teacher	• Teacher valued as a guide and facilitator
• Teacher should not be questioned	• Teacher is open to challenge
• Student motivated by family and pressure to excel	• Student motivated by desire for individual development
• Positive value placed on effacement and silence	• Positive value placed on self-expression of ideas
• Emphasis on group orientation to learning	• Emphasis on individual development and creativity in learning

The Malay society is very much hierarchical in nature (Abdullah, 1996), from the smallest social unit of the family to administrative structures. For example, in the family unit, hierarchy is distinct and pronounced, whereby the father, the head of the family is respected and whose instructions are always adhered to while the woman is accorded a subservient role (Hanafi, 2004). This hierarchical relationship is carried through to the classroom context and is prevalent at all levels of learning, right from the school setting to tertiary education, where the instructor's role is seen to be exclusive and deems requiring the utmost respect (Saleh & Aziz, 2012; Naginder, 2006). Thus, in the teacher-student relationship, esteem and respect for the teacher are crucial.

The word *guru* (teacher, in Malay), with its epistemological roots in Sanskrit, means a sacred guide or a holy prophet. The teacher-student relationship in the Malay culture espouses values such as respect for the authority of the teacher, the unquestionable authority of the teacher and a positive value on effacement and silence. Hence, opposing the teacher's views is deemed a violation of basic religious

teachings, and thus, disrespectful, as teachers are our second parents (at school). In other words, the blatant voicing out of opinions is 'displaced' autonomy. In comparison to other Asian settings, Giang's (2010) study on Vietnamese learners show that 82 per cent (128/156) of the learners prefer a more democratic situation where decisions pertaining to the "what", "how" and "when" of vocabulary learning are made in mutual agreement. As an Asian community, the Vietnamese demonstrate more empowerment in making decisions in learning as compared to their Malaysian peers.

Thus, we can see a tendency for Malaysian learners to be less empowered as a result of the overuse of teacher-centred approaches in class. As Nithy (2010) points out, "students and teachers should be agents of change, but because teachers are so authoritarian in classrooms, most learners will not dare speak up and will not argue for perspectives opposed to their teachers' views" (p. E18). As a result, learners are reluctant to partake in decisions pertaining to learning, and the teacher continues to be the locus of control.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

Allwright (1990, cited in Yim, 2004, p. 2) contends that characteristically, autonomous learners have the ability to reflect based on their knowledge of learning and the willingness to work in collaboration with others, hence they are not engaged in a solitary process. As a form of independent learning (Thanasoulas, 2000), empowerment does not mean learners study alone and is therefore, not an isolated learning process. Indeed, achieving self-direction is paradoxically said to be a collaborative process (Guo & Zhang, 2004, Abdullah, 2001) where the learner makes meaning of learning in social negotiation with the teacher (see Dass & Ferguson, 2012).

For the teacher, Benson and Voller (1997) suggest five levels of implementation of empowerment in class, that is, beginning from awareness (of the pedagogical goals and content) through involvement, intervention and creation to transcendence (making links between the content of the classroom to the world beyond).

With this precept, the study was undertaken to probe how the teacher can play a lead role in encouraging empowerment in class, taking into account the characteristics of Malay learners who are hierarchy-

driven and restrained in their relationship with their teacher(s). In this respect, pedagogical approaches to vocabulary instruction that incorporate the means to accelerate learner empowerment were probed. Besides that, Malay learners, being part of a collective society may have the potential to learn vocabulary in a collaborative and supportive way, which Allwright (1990, cited in Yim, 2004) has claimed is also characteristic of autonomous learners. This study was thus pursued with these considerations in mind. Basically, the study was undertaken to enquire how teacher-led empowerment can be established through a supportive learning environment among Malay tertiary learners in the learning of lexical items.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research questions that guided the study were:

- (1) What pedagogical approaches can the instructor use to create a supportive learning environment that encourages autonomous learning of vocabulary items?
- (2) How does the instructor design her lessons to encourage the autonomous learning of vocabulary items in the context of the Malay culture?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Overt behaviours that can be observed and measured, as in the behaviourist perspective are quantifiable measures of learning. Behaviourists believe that language development is a learned behaviour, comprising sequences of stimulus and response with a degree of reinforcement. Therefore, the mind is seen as a 'black box' (Mergel, 2001) in the sense that response to stimulus is quantitatively observable. In this theory, learning is basically a quantifiable result of a stimulus (for example, the teacher, the environment, syllabus, peers, etc.).

In the context of empowered learning, behaviourism being quantifiable is admissible as a theory of learning, as it is based on the observable responses demonstrated by learners towards the learning tasks in a teacher-led classroom. In drawing parallels to its

simplistic notions of stimulus-response in the learning process, we can see the simple connections to the idea of autonomy in several studies which show that the teacher is an important stimulus as well as provider of reinforcement, the one who would determine whether there is positive response (see Naginder, 2005; Ismail, 2004) or negative response (see Naginder & Osman, 2004; Hussin, Maarof & D'Cruz, 2000) from the learners. Research on teacher education also shows that the teacher's role is paramount in motivating students to learn (Abdullah, 2000, cited in Mahamod, Nik Yusoff, & Ibrahim, 2009, p. 8). The level of artistry demonstrated by the teacher (in the form of being the stimulus and/or reinforcement) in his or her enterprise through interrelated components such as developing positive relationships and respect for learners, good instructional organisation and classroom management (Fumin & Li, 2012), user-friendly instructions which are learner-centred, are true measures of effectiveness in achieving the desired instructional outcomes and yields positive responses from learners. The conceptual connection of stimulus-response in teacher-led empowerment in the learning of vocabulary items can be observed through the dimensions in Figure 1.

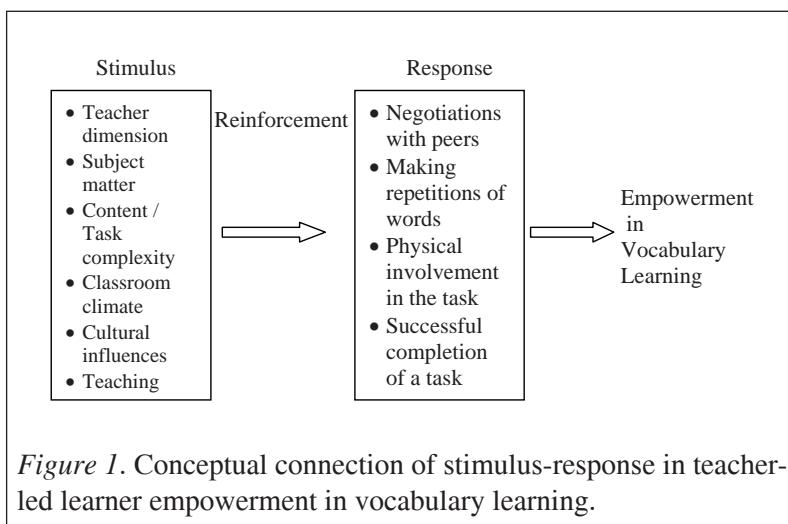


Figure 1. Conceptual connection of stimulus-response in teacher-led learner empowerment in vocabulary learning.

Response, in the context of this study is referred to as the observable behavioural responses learners may display towards vocabulary learning in a given task, based on a host of lecturer-related causes, the way the subject matter is presented, how content difficulty and

complexity are managed, and how the lecturer sets the classroom climate. In vocabulary learning, learners' observable signs can be behaviours such as negotiations with peers, making repetitions of words, generative use, (physical) involvement in the task and successful completion of a task (Nation, 2001). These observable behaviours in reciprocation can determine the extent of empowerment displayed in achieving the goals of vocabulary learning.

Table 2 shows how the psychological conditions which encourage learning are translated into observable behaviours (column 2), suggesting that these conditions are occurring.

Table 2

*The Conditions of Learning, Signs and Features in Activities with a Vocabulary Learning Goal (Nation, 2001)*

Psychological conditions encouraging learning	Signs that the conditions are likely to be occurring	Design features of the activity that promote the conditions
Noticing a word	The learner consults a glossary. The learner pauses over the word. The learner negotiates the word.	Definition, glosses, highlighting unknown words in salient positions
Retrieving a word	The learner pauses to recall a meaning. The learner does not need to consult a dictionary or gloss. The learner produces a previously unknown word.	Retelling spoken or written input
Using the word generatively	The learner produces a word in a new sentence context. The learner produces associations, causal links	Role play based on written input Retelling without the input text, Brainstorming

Hence, in helping learners achieve vocabulary learning goals, the lecturer's role is paramount. It is more significant perhaps than any other factors in teaching and learning methodology. In a classroom of mixed-ability learners, the teacher cannot be satisfied taking on the role of a facilitator. In this case, he or she has to guide the learners actively by noting their strengths and weaknesses, as well as act based on a knowledge of their cultural inclinations. This would allow the planning of effective lessons to meet learner needs. In striving to

create empowered learners, it is also very important for the lecturer to probe and acknowledge the building blocks or incremental stages of empowered learning. Scharle and Szabo (2000) define seven factors relating to learner empowerment, namely motivation and self-confidence, monitoring and evaluation, learning strategies, cooperation and group cohesion, (teacher's) sharing information with the learner, (teacher's) consistent control, and involving the learner in delegating tasks and decisions. Furthermore, they offer a three-stage process to instill empowerment - raising awareness, raising attitudes and transferring roles. The final stage of transferring roles to learners involves the shift in responsibility from the teacher to the learners, whereby teachers play a key role in ensuring the smooth transition to learner autonomy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This exploratory qualitative study was carried out on a group of 34 male and female learners of a mixed language ability class from a Business Studies programme. The class comprised a combination of high, average and low language ability learners. The learners were engaged in the learning of lexical items in an English language course at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. All the learners, as well as their English language lecturer, a female, were from a homogenous culture - they were all Malays and Muslims. As such, the lecturer had full insights into the learners' cultural inclinations to learning and was able to make pedagogical decisions with the learners' culture in mind. All the student participants were 20 years of age.

The researcher was the primary instrument for gathering and analysing the qualitative data. The researcher in this study was a non-participant who did not contrive the learning context in any way. Data were collected from the participants, and their lecturer, who was the key informant in this study. Key informants are crucial to a study because they "provide insights that no amount of observation would reveal" (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 399).

Triangulation of data collection methods were carried out to ensure the validity and reliability of the information that was gathered because human instruments can be as fallible as any other forms

of research instruments. Moreover, the limitations of a human instrument is that it is limited by being human, that is, mistakes can be made, opportunities may be overlooked and personal biases, prejudices and preferences may interfere (Merriam, 1998). This form of experimenter effect (Borg & Gall, 1989) poses a threat to the issue of external validity, as the biases and expectations of the observer may distort the data. To overcome these problems, Merriam (1998) suggests that the researcher possess a repertoire of skills such as tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to context and data, as well as good communication skills. Hence, the qualitative data obtained was triangulated from the two sources to ensure and increase the validity of the data.

It was felt that the information provided by the key informant was valid enough to corroborate (confirm or reject) information provided by the participants, instead of conducting classroom observations by the researcher. The investigator's presence in the classroom might have distorted the natural learning atmosphere and might have seemed obtrusive to the participants and the class lecturer, which might have resulted in unnatural behaviours of consciousness in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the key informant was conferred with regularly in providing rich input concerning participants' observed learning behaviours in class.

Data were collected through weekly reflective interviews with the learners and their lecturer. In order to source for comprehensive data for the study, four rounds of in-depth reflective interviews were conducted and audio-taped with different learners from the class during the course of the study, which lasted about one month. The interviewees were selected based on their language proficiency, that is, a mix of low, average and high ability learners were interviewed every week. An interview guide was used to prompt the researcher in probing the learning phenomenon, processes and variables under investigation.

The researcher also perused the lecturer's teaching portfolio to obtain insights into her teaching philosophy and the pedagogical approaches that guided her teaching. The lecturer prepared daily lesson plans throughout the semester, which were referred to and discussed during interview sessions with the lecturer. The lecturer's lesson plans and daily reflections were analysed to seek evidence

which would enrich (triangulate) data obtained from the participants and justify or substantiate learners' claims, such as feelings, perceptions and observable behaviours.

The audio taped data was transcribed verbatim to build the audit trail (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) for analysis and to ensure reliability of the data collected. In the audit trail, researcher field notes were also made based on the lecturers' insights and the learners' learning experiences and opinions related at the interviews. These were transcribed and analysed to look for practices which supported and encouraged learner empowerment in the process of learning lexical items. The transcriptions were read and re-read until the researcher discerned patterns or themes corresponding to the conceptual framework and variables probed in this study. Several themes or phenomena which emerged from the data were classified systematically and objectively into different facets of teacher-supported autonomy. According to Boyatzis (1998, cited in Abu Bakar, 2007, p. 39), "thematic analysis enables scholars, observers, or practitioner to use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations, and organizations." When analysing the data from interviews, the researcher looked for phrases as well as key words that would fit the definition of the parameters being investigated, for example, "I felt bored", "I like ...", "I didn't go through my work ..."

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results provide an insightful take on the lecturer's supportive teaching practices which encourage the learning of vocabulary items among Malay tertiary learners.

**What pedagogical approaches can the instructor use to create a supportive learning environment that encourages autonomous learning of vocabulary items?**

### *Provide Learning Opportunities in Class*

The pedagogical approach used by the lecturer and the emphasis given to lexical learning were crucial in determining the extent of vocabulary learning among learners. According to the learners,

they were satisfied with their lecturer's pedagogical approach as there were generally adequate opportunities for practicing the four language skills in class for them to learn vocabulary. However, they also acknowledged that more exercises were needed on vocabulary and grammar, and more was required on their part, like exercises and presentations "to push ourselves to do." This was remarked during the interviews with the researcher, and proves the cultural hierarchical notion of student-teacher relationship, whereby the learners refrained from directly expressing their opinions and learning preferences to their teacher, but instead, were more open and expressive to the researcher, a non-participant observer of the study.

The students highly preferred speaking tasks as these were seen as helping to improve their language ability. Speaking activities such as group discussions, role plays and choral speaking empowered the learners to express their ideas and thoughts. Role play situations such as communicating with tourists and foreigners were much appreciated, besides songs, music as well as language games that incorporated speaking tasks. The preference for speaking may be because the learners liked to talk a lot, as narrated by one of the high ability learners in the class, "We like to talk a lot, therefore speaking segment is the best." Speaking was found to be the easiest activity when trying to express ideas and encourage vocabulary use, as confirmed by both the lecturer and the participants alike, for example, "... what I want to say, I just say. I don't care about is it ok or not ... I just want to speak, whatever, is it mistake, is it correct, I don't care."

Besides that, the learners also often had the chance to speak in front of the class through public speaking and opportunities of class presentations. From their lecturers' lesson plans, it was found that occasionally, they were asked to explain and elaborate something. They were sometimes given a famous quotation, or a proverb. An example of a situation or opportunity to encourage vocabulary use was to consider what learners would do differently if they had the chance to relive their lives. Most topics for the course related to the learners' lives as teenagers who were growing up in a technologically advanced and demanding world. For example, the lecturer's lesson plans showed that the semester started with the topic of teenage curfew. As it was close to the learners' worldview

and interest, the lecturer observed that it gave them ample room to voice their opinions. Activities included giving helpful advice to a troubled teenager, whereby, the group assumed the role of an advice page columnist. The learners had to identify the problem, suggest possible solutions and explain and justify these in front of the class. To complete the task, the learners were required to use as many of the words learned as possible. On-site notes taken by the lecturer and subsequently related to the researcher show that this was handled successfully and learners generated language and words previously learnt in class, such as “rebel”, “rational”, and “juvenile”.

The lecturer was also queried on the extent of opportunities available for lexical learning by the learners. On this matter, the lecturer explained that she ensured that there was “sufficient room for vocabulary expansion for every lesson” as she felt that the learners’ level of lexical ability was below the expected ability of dealing with tertiary level texts. It was found that the lecturer played a significant role in facilitating and enhancing the learners’ lexical learning experience. It was discerned through interviews with the lecturer that classroom teaching was geared towards improving learners’ communication skills and to build confidence in communicating effectively, using expressions previously learned, or those which they were learning in the semester. Thus, having adequate opportunities in learning via the four language skills is vital because it is the pathway to attaining empowerment. Giang (2010) explains this very well:

...we learn to speak only by speaking, to read only by reading, and so on. Thus in formal language learning, the scope of learner autonomy is always constrained by what the lecturer can do in the target language; in other words, the scope of our autonomy as language learners is partly a function of the scope of our autonomy as target language users. (p. 29)

### ***Learn Vocabulary in Context***

In the class observed, vocabulary was taught in context most of the time as the lecturer believed that memorising of meanings or synonyms was less effective. A few new words were introduced every week. These were words learners encountered repetitively in

their reading or words they had used incorrectly before and those they would need for the speaking and writing tasks. The lecturer said that she believed in killing more than one bird with a stone with her learners. Proverbs, famous quotations and sayings were used to encourage them to become better learners. According to her, trying to understand the intended meaning of a quotation was only the first task. The lesson plans were designed in such a way that learners' comprehension was further tested by how they explained what was contained in a single line or a few short lines. Equally important were aspects of what they could learn from a quotation and sharing with the class about how they were able to relate it to their own life. The learners were also taught to make use of contextual clues to figure out the meanings of unknown words. Extra guidance was often required of the lecturer as most learners, especially the lower language ability learners did not immediately see the connection between certain words and the phrases related to them, as one low ability learner admitted, ““... *kalau tembak, tak kena lah sebab dia ... dia lari jugak ... nak faham maksud tu susah sikit*” (Participant I; Translation: If I make a wild guess, it would be incorrect as the meaning would be inaccurate ... it's difficult to understand the meaning).

This is where teacher modeling of the use of the correct strategy in decoding meaning of words helped to empower learners in the learning process. When decoding meaning of words in context, the lecturer remarked: “In general, students still expect teacher to provide them with the meanings of words or explanations.” As such, the lecturer made use of the word that they were familiar with to teach them a new word, and then continued with appropriate examples and explanation. Often, the learners were not able to see another word embedded in the word, for example, the word “envisioned”. However, the lecturer recalled that on one particular day, when asked for the meaning of “vision”, they were able to respond correctly with sufficient contextual clues.

It was discerned from the interviews with the learners that in general, they had not received adequate strategy training in guessing the meaning of unknown words in contexts in previous semesters. This state of affairs had remained for a long time as the participants informed the researcher that their English lecturers in previous semesters had instructed them to resort to the dictionary whenever

they came across unknown words, without making any attempt to engage them in activities such as using contextual clues to derive meaning of words. This seems to support Catalan (2003) and Fan (2003)'s assertion that teachers tend to teach vocabulary in an ad hoc way and leave learners to refer to the dictionary every time they do not know the meaning of words.

Other supportive vocabulary activities included the use of affixes and listening activities where tape scripts were provided. Learners used these to check their answers, to see how certain sentences were rephrased in the question and learned new phrases, for example, “boring a person to death” has nothing to do with killing someone.

### ***Use Vocabulary List and Direct Teaching***

While a number of words were highlighted and explained as the lessons unfolded, there were others which were only included at the end of the reading texts. A vocabulary list followed each reading text to help learners understand the text better without having to refer to the dictionary each time they came across a new word. According to the lecturer, this was to encourage the less able ones who were already not too interested in reading. Having to check for the meaning of every other word is a tedious job and discouraged learners would ultimately be put off.

While the lecturer made it a point to go through the list with the learners, the learners were also expected to be independent to revise the list on their own. For the average and high ability learners in the class, the vocabulary list empowered them as it provided a means to cross check the meanings of words they already knew or were able to guess using contextual clues, as related by one high language ability learner, : “this will encourage students to read and learn new words.” It made them feel good about their ability to make intelligent guesses. Words that were well understood were better remembered and recalled.

Whenever necessary, vocabulary was taught directly. The lecturer pointed out that reviewing parts of speech often took place as an activity in itself as most learners had not fully mastered this aspect of grammar, and they would frequently use wrong words at all the wrong places. The lesson was treated as a vocabulary activity rather

than a grammar one, and the lecturer said that she would place a lot of emphasis in ensuring that the learners were able to grasp the different derivatives of each word, and recognise the different parts of speech, and contextual use, of the word. For example, the lesson plans showed that in the unit on the Internet, the class was given this sentence, “Do not let a fool kiss you, and do not let a kiss fool you.” This is a clear illustration of how one word (“fool”) can be a noun and a verb. The lecturer encouraged the learners and explained what one could do with the Internet, as the leading source of learning vocabulary (Giang, 2010). It is not merely for chatting or searching for information; thus, English can be learnt in interesting ways if learners know where to look.

### ***Spiral Building of Lessons***

In learning lexical items, word knowledge can lead to acquisition of a word skill if a learner is able to recognise the vocabulary item in a particular context and expand on what he or she previously knows about the word. Linking new meanings to existing word knowledge will positively affect vocabulary learning. Thus, the learner would use the word skillfully in different contexts and experience empowerment. The lecturer believed that learners would comprehend better when new information is integrated with topics that they are already familiar with, hence, lessons were built spirally and sequentially, based on the topics or issues previously learned.

Reading texts were often followed by speaking and writing exercises in order to reinforce the use of the words taught, and avoid learning words from isolated lessons that did not encourage retention. For example, the successful transfer of learning will occur when learning discourse markers. One student related that he could learn some of the discourse markers because he “had learnt about it before” and [he] always use it in [his] essay.” In another case, another student shared that she was able to successfully learn and use the word ”talent” in helping her elaborate the speaking task. When the learners showed ability of retaining a word, the lecturer expressed satisfaction as her “faith in them [was] restored.” The lecturer relayed an incident whereby once, in class, the word “enhance” re-surfaced and when one of the learners was able to say what it meant, the lecturer actually thanked him for remembering it. The following day, when he came up to the front of the class to speak, he made sure he used

the same word and then repeated it loud and clear. The same word re-appeared a number of times - in discussions and unexpectedly, in the listening test, which was dealt with successfully by the learners. At the end of each unit, the learners were also tested to see how many words were actually learned. The test or class exercise was either in the form of letter writing, gap fill exercise or other written work. This was appreciated by the learners, as one learner remarked, "that can attract me to do that exercise ... so that I can remember the word as well as good."

**How does the instructor design her lessons to encourage autonomous learning of vocabulary items in the context of the Malay culture?**

*Encourage Collaborative Learning Tasks*

The lecturer's pedagogy subscribed to culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) which uses learners' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, performance styles and the diversity of learners to tailor learning to be appropriate and effective. In order to address the learning disposition of some shy learners as well as keeping the Malay learners' culture and learning inclinations in mind, the lecturer tapped on group learning activities and found these to be non-intimidating. When the lecturer conducted role play or group assignments, all groups were noted to be actively engaged in discussions. Even some of the weaker learners were reported to be participating actively, since the learners got to pick their own group members and thus, felt empowered. The lecturer found this to be very motivating and rewarding in her pedagogical endeavour. She noted that high ability learners usually presented their role plays without the script in hand; even the average ability and low proficiency ones could deliver with good expressions and right intonations as it boosted their confidence and enhanced speaking and oral communication ability. One of the learners confirmed this: "... the spontaneous speaking make me can improve my speaking." This positive attitude towards speaking corresponded to Ting, Mahadhir and Chang's (2010) study which showed that oral activities have a positive effect on language proficiency, especially among less proficient learners. Among their close friends, the learners were less shy, and did not seem to mind when another group member disagreed with them during a group activity, as they were able to

express themselves using words that they could manage, without feeling overly conscious of making lexical errors. In fact, arguing for their points made the activity more enjoyable and they seemed to have fun in such discussion episodes. Hence, empowerment was practised through the mere act of doing what they were supposed to do.

Since the Malay culture is collectivist, role play and other enacted scenes such as drama were carried out regularly. This is to address the Malay learners' preference for group learning activities (Majid, 2008; Merriam & Mohamad, 2000; Abdullah, 1996) and emphasise the unity and spirit of group working (Hansen, 1996). One of the role plays done in class involved learners writing their own scripts. The lecturer noted that the learners took a lot of pride in their work, in writing their preferred expressions and self-selected words and phrases, hence enjoying their work and performance. It was a meaningful speaking activity, instead of reading meaningless dialogues from the text.

Role playing also gave the learners the chance to be in someone else's shoes - to assume a different character, while experimenting with words and phrases. It was a good opportunity for the lecturer to observe them as some came out of their shell long enough for the lecturer to observe their potential. There were different levels of confidence displayed by the learners. Except for a few weak learners who displayed less confidence, the rest did well. The less proficient learners had fewer lines, and did not fully memorise their text. They were inclined to read out their lines in low voices, and were dependent on the scripts in hand, rather than communicating. Nevertheless, they were observed to enjoy such lessons of collaborative learning.

### ***Not Push Reluctant Speakers***

When doing activities such as class presentations, the lecturer was extra cautious in keeping the Malay cultural traits in mind. As Malays are a cohesive group that stress on the importance of the cultural value of face saving (see Majid, 2008; Abdullah, 1996), the lecturer made a conscious effort not to force reluctant speakers or put them in a spot. Instead, she solicited opinions and participation only from those who wished to share their experiences and stories. According to the lecturer, it was not always easy for her to draw the

less proficient learners, in particular, out of their shell. They seldom volunteered to answer. They felt safer when responding to the lecturer's questions together with the rest of the class, but loathed being put in a spot. The lecturer said these learners would rather keep quiet than answering incorrectly, thus avoiding "making a fool of himself or herself" in front of everyone else.

The lecturer's understanding of learners' reticence as they feared being put in a spot was reinforced some time during the first half of the semester when individual learners were required to speak on a given topic. Two or three of them talked about some things from their past that they were not proud of. Many were objective about themselves; they spoke honestly and without any pretence. Some even shed tears as they related their stories. For many of them, the activity on that particular evening was like a journey to self-discovery. The fact that even the normally quiet learners felt very safe revealing some aspects about their past was a good sign that a comfortable and non-intimidating learning environment had been established, and learners could participate and contribute to discussions when they felt comfortable in a relaxed classroom ambience.

Another way the lecturer tackled the situation was to get the learners to respond to certain questions on paper first. For example, when the lecturer wished to find out the extent the learners used the Internet, how much time they spent surfing and where they surfed, a simple questionnaire was given to everyone in class where they indicated their answers by ticking the appropriate column. Then, the lecturer and learners went through all the questions and statements; it was easier to get some learners to respond this way, especially the less confident ones, as a non-threatening atmosphere was created for language and lexical expression.

## CONCLUSION

From the results discussed in the preceding section, this study shows that lecturers can create a supportive learning environment that leads to positive affective states among learners by incorporating lessons which suit learner preferences. For learners who belong to the Malay culture, activities involving interaction with others in socially

significant tasks of collaborative work and oral communication (such as role play, drama, group presentations) are often preferred. Even the less proficient and shy learners are more engaged when the language skill addresses their affinity, namely speaking skill, as the majority rank speaking activities as their most favoured language learning experience. With positive affective states, learners show mental readiness in receiving input and consequently, meaningful learning of lexical items takes place.

An important criterion which ensures learner empowerment in the lexical learning process is the disposition of the lecturer. The lecturer in this study showed evidence of amiable disposition by allowing learners to choose how they wanted to carry out activities which could enhance autonomous learning of lexical items, such as role play or speaking activities. Therefore, the teacher must create a conducive environment, free of authoritarian control, where learning decisions are made amicably in the spirit of democracy between the teacher and learners. Teachers are instrumental as “the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted” (Barfield, Ashwell, Carroll, Collins, Cowie, Critchley, Head, Nix, Obermeier, Robertson, 2001, p. 3). It is thus vital that the lecturer provides a supportive learning environment.

There should be the element of fun and enjoyment, with a touch of creativity to maximise learners’ language learning experience (Tan, 2011). This would help reduce anxiety levels and enhance the learning experience as learner attitudes can be modified through experience (Elyidrim & Ashton, 2006). Lecturers who employ appealing teaching methods will be viewed as being friendly and learners, in turn, feel more at ease.

A non-judgmental and warm social setting must also be established to intensify learning. This can be done by creating interesting lesson plans which incorporate different methodologies, strategies, techniques and procedures to address the learners’ interest as well as more communicative means of learning lexical items, as done by this lecturer.

From the findings, it is clear that a more concerted effort is necessary to awaken learners’ metacognition (how, what, when) in learning by initiating empowerment of self-responsibility and self-directed

learning behavior. Nithy (2010, p. E18) suggests that “school leadership should really start looking at students as clients, to find out what it is they want and need in order to make their learning process more effective, fun and interesting.” Thus, in creating empowered learners, the instructor has to play the lead role and collaborate with learners in mutual respect in a supportive learning environment.

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